

# Coma victim's tragic story began with a car wreck

Pregnancy brings back friends' memories of a promising life

By ALAN MORRELL  
and STEVE ORR  
STAFF WRITERS

Her boyfriend's injuries were numerous and painful — broken arm, broken leg, broken collarbone, shattered kneecap.

But he healed. The young Monroe County woman wasn't so lucky. She was pulled unconscious from the wreckage of her car on a rural road near Ithaca.

"They hoped she would be awake within a few days or a week. I certainly was hoping that," the man recalled recently. "But time stretched on and nothing happened."

Ten years later, another tragedy has been added to the sad saga. The woman, now 29 and still in a coma, was raped at a Brighton nursing home and is nearly six months pregnant. Her family has decided to allow her to carry the baby to term. Sources have said a family member wants to raise the child.

Only a half-dozen cases are

## Laws, mysteries

**Recoveries:** A woman awakes from a coma after giving birth; another becomes responsive after an abortion is performed. **3A**

**Legalities:** The baby's custody is a tangled issue. **3A**

known in which a comatose woman gave birth. Experts say they know of no other case in which a woman already in a coma became pregnant.

Unaware of what's going on around her, the young woman has become a cause celebre worldwide.

She personifies debates over abortion, rape, privacy and decision-making for the incapacitated, and has focused attention on patient safety and nursing-home care.

In the month since the rape was reported to authorities, the woman's family has remained in seclusion.

Police have made no arrest

COMA, PAGE **3A**

# Others in coma have given birth

By STEVE GIBB  
and ALAN MORRELL  
Times Union Staff Writers

Barbie Blodgett was 13 months pregnant when she suffered a brain injury during an auto accident and fell into a coma. After more than five months of medical care, the Yonkers, Wis., woman gave birth to a healthy baby boy.

That was miracle enough — but there was more.

Not long after she delivered David Blodgett III on Dec. 8, 1989, the mother began to wake from her coma. And some observers wondered if the act of giving birth itself helped rouse her.

"Her family believed it. I suppose it's possible that after she delivered, some change in the hormone structure caused her to be more alert," said Dr. Mary Boudreau, Blodgett's rehabilitation physician, who is skeptical of the notion herself.

"There are no data. There are no studies. All we can do is observe the cases that show up," Boudreau said this week.

Blodgett, now 30, is one of only a half-dozen women known to have

lapsed into comas while pregnant and still delivered their babies.

A number of neurologists and obstetricians say they have never heard of a case like the one involving Blodgett — one in which a woman in a comatose state for many years becomes pregnant and is allowed to carry the baby to term.

The woman now is a patient at Strong Memorial Hospital and is listed in satisfactory condition. She was raped and impregnated while a resident at Westfall Health Care Center in Brighton.

In accord with the family's wishes, hospital officials decline to say anything more about the case.

It is not even clear if "comatose" is the proper word. The Brighton police report on the incident, for instance, described the woman as "a quadriplegic and nearly comatose" and that she is "non-verbal and cannot communicate to others."

Secure families with the use of the woman's eyes sometimes are open and she can make guttural sounds. Since she responds to pain, but she is believed to have no conscious thought process. She cannot communicate in any way.

The woman is fed through a tube

to her stomach. She sometimes is propped up in a chair, but her limbs are contracted.

Some medical experts say the word "coma" is used to describe a person in the immediate aftermath of a brain injury. The phrase "permanent vegetative state" sometimes is used to describe a longer-term state in which a patient opens his or her eyes or even moves slightly.

**Outlook uncertain**

Hospital officials have declined to comment on the outlook for a successful pregnancy.

But a number of outside experts say there is nothing to automatically preclude the woman from delivering a healthy baby.

Dr. Bruce Rodgers, director of maternal and fetal medicine at the State University of New York at Buffalo, said obstetricians often help deliver babies of women who are debilitated or unable to communicate because of problems such as a stroke, epilepsy, paraplegia or multiple sclerosis.

"It's not uncommon at all," said Rodgers. If the mother cannot consent, he said, it is the physician's duty to help push the baby out, attending staff can pull it

out, he said.

Cesarean sections, in which the baby is removed surgically, also can be done. Some physicians said they would use a C-section to deliver the comatose woman's child, though Rodgers said she might be a poor surgical risk.

Source has said that a member of the comatose woman's family intends to raise the child. Even if that is so, the infant likely would have to remain in Strong until a Family Court judge hears a petition for temporary custody.

Under the law, virtually anyone could request custody — even the report or his kin, according to Rochester lawyer James Himm, an expert on family law. He said the father's rights would be "very, very limited," however. "I think it's a rare circumstance in which those rights would be asserted," he said.

It seems likely that custody would be awarded to a member of the mother's family as long as he or she is willing to take care of the child. That person, or another party, would have to go to court to adopt the child permanently, Himm said. The prospect of a lawsuit of lawyers gathering to discuss the fate

of the child is reminiscent of another coma case, perhaps the best-known one, that ended quite differently.

**The Klein case**

That was the case of Nancy Klein, a Long Island woman who was about nine weeks pregnant when she suffered brain damage in a car accident in 1989.

Her husband, Marty Klein, petitioned a judge to be appointed his wife's legal guardian so he could order an abortion. Doctors had told him his wife would have a better chance of bearing the child if she were not pregnant.

Anti-abortion activists went to court to block Klein's petition. In a two-week flurry of legal arguments, the case moved all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The judiciary concluded that "Klein" had no standing to intervene.

Nancy Klein's pregnancy was aborted in February 1989. In the past few months, he was dubious of any connection. "I know of no one else for saying that it's only through a coma that women can improve," she said.

After 10 years (in a coma), it should be extremely unlikely for there to be a change," she said of the Rochester case.

Some doctors speculated that Blodgett's injured brain benefited somehow from the extra estrogen and other powerful hormones that pregnant women experience. Rodgers of Buffalo also noted that the case apply to the brain lesions during pregnancy.

He was dubious of any connection. "I know of no one else for saying that it's only through a coma that women can improve," she said.

Blodgett has recovered somewhat as well as she can speak. Boudreau said, though not well. She typed messages one-handed on a computer for a time, but decided she preferred trying to talk.

She is not a normal person. But she knows who she is, she knows who her children are," Boudreau said.

## Coma pregnancy brings back friends' memories

FROM PAGE 1A

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Tragedy The Westfall Health Care Center in Brighton is under a watchful eye after a comatose patient was raped and became pregnant. The family plans to have the woman carry the baby to term.

normal life. She wanted to get married and have a family."

**The Westfall connection**

Westfall Health Care Center, near the intersection of Westfall Road and South County Road, opened in December 1984. It was intended to help local hospitals by providing a haven for patients, young and old, who needed long-term specialized care.

That may be what attracted the comatose woman's family to the home, she was transferred there in February 1989.

But the 145-bed nursing home had cerebral abnormalities almost from the outset.

Just last year, a 40-year-old resident accused a male nurse's aide in September, leading her to the child's life.

At about 2 percent of all fetuses that undergo blood sampling for medical reasons perish as a result, according to Dr. Bruce Rodgers, director of maternal and fetal medicine at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

"I would question the wisdom of doing that," he said.

Officials have not asked for permission to obtain blood "to test," "That has not been a consideration at this point," Voilard said.

A blood sample can be obtained without risk to the infant after the child's life.

Westfall is owned by a partnership formed by surgeon Dr. Kenneth Oursel and Dr. Richard Green and accountant John J. Gable.

The owners are in the process of selling the facility to a nonprofit company formed by the University of Rochester. UK bought the owners \$1.5 million to help open the home and provided consulting services with the beginning.

The citations have nothing to do with the rape or the sex abuse case. Nonetheless, state health department workers have monitored conditions at Westfall while police investigate the crimes there.

**The DNA investigation**

With no competent witnesses, police say they may turn to DNA to learn the rapist's identity. It should be possible to compare DNA samples from the baby and any suspects to determine paternity.

Voilard said most potential suspects have agreed to submit to blood tests, the best source for DNA. "We intend to begin that process soon," Voilard said earlier this week.

News of the case has sparked widespread debate about the ethics of a comatose woman carrying a child fathered by a rapist.

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